DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 192 281 CS 005 655

AUTHOR Kay, Marilyn
TITLE Coping with College (The Successful College Student with a Learning Disability).
PUB DATE May 80
NOTE 14p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (25th, St. Louis, MO, May 5-9, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students: Exceptional Persons: Higher Education: *Reading Difficulties: *Reading Improvement: Reading Teachers: School Counseling: *Student Development: *Student Needs: Student Teacher Relationship

ABSTRACT

The reading instructor and clinician may need to come to terms with the need for a changing role in working with college students with severe reading problems. As a growing number of intellectually able children with severe reading problems are identified during elementary and secondary school years, more students with a history of learning disabilities will be applying to colleges and universities. Although early identification and specialized help should bring about success in reading for these students, there will continue to be students who will need to circumvent some of the traditional reading requirements and find more efficient ways to learn and perform in college. The role of the reading instructor and clinician in helping these students find more efficient ways of meeting their goals in college should include the following: (1) recognizing when a student needs and can benefit from specialized instruction: (2) recommending coping strategies that fit individual needs: and (3) determining when vocational or psychological counselling is needed. (A list of 14 suggestions for college students with specific learning problems is attached.) (RL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Marilyn Kay
607 W. Nevada
Urbana, IL

ED192281

COPING WITH COLLEGE

(The Successful College Student with a Learning Disability)

I would like to keep a promise to Judy Hockett, who was a student of mine several years ago. Her goal, when she came for reading therapy was to learn to read before her husband graduated from college. She met that goal but at our last session, just before she and her husband left for Kansas, she said, "Whenever you have a chance to talk to groups about reading problems, would you be sure to tell them that just because you can't read, it doesn't mean you're dumb." She went on to say, "You know, they make a way for the blind. They make a way for the crippled. Now I don't want a way made for me but I'd just like a little understanding."

I do think we are beginning to provide a way for people like Judy. Students with severe reading problems can now gain entrance to many colleges and universities throughout the United States. Sometimes they can be accepted without anyone even knowing that a serious reading problem exists. This was especially true in the past when revealing a reading disability meant that you were automatically branded "stupid." Currently, because of a better understanding of learning disabilities, students applying to colleges can openly acknowledge their disability. For example, Scholastic Aptitude Tests can now be given orally for the student who has severe reading problems. Many colleges have set up support programs for the learning disabled. An example of a highly successful program for the

CS205655

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Marilyn Kay
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

learning disabled is one that has been set up at Southern Illinois University through the Department of Special Education. The program, directed by Barbara Cordoni, was planned by people who had had practical experience with persons with learning disabilities. There was a solid understanding of the needs of the learning disabled student who wants to progress smoothly through four years of college.

The college entrant with a severe reading problem is often intelligent, clever, and enterprising. He is often highly motivated and may have special gifts or talents that make him well-suited to the pursuit of a college education. Of necessity, he brings with him many coping mechanisms for dealing with the pressures of learning that inevitably arise when reading is a struggle.

Allen Beyler, a successful building contractor and a person with a reading disability, completed 4 years of education in a good liberal arts college. He also completed one year of masters work in the school of architecture at the University of Illinois. Allen continues, at age 50, to have reading and spelling problems. When he reads, he must scrutinize each word and his sequential memory problem continues to seriously hamper his spelling of even co mm words. He is unable to use a dictionary or a telephone b o look up words or names that are difficult to spell ow then, did he manage to successfully complete a college e ucation at a time when public awareness of specific disabilities was non-existant and special assistance for reading disabilities was not available in either our schools or colleges? Special assistance

was provided by Allen's mother who continued to read most of his assignments to him as she had done in grade school and high school. His mother, an English teacher, corrected his spelling and his sentence structure on all of his papers.

Allen spoke to each of his professors about his reading and spelling problems whenever he could not easily hide the fact that he could not read well or spell adequately. He told them, "I can do some things very well, but I may need a little extra time or adjustment in order to complete some assignments." This ability to talk with his instructors was especially important when his mother died suddenly at the end of his sophomore year in college.

Because many of the instructors knew Allen's family, as a family with high academic achievements, they were less critical of Allen's difficulty with reading and spelling than would usually be the case. They appreciated Allen's intellectual ability, perhaps accepting his deviation from the norm in reading as eccentricity rather than stupidy.

Allen's basic self-confidence, his willingness to keep on struggling, and his acceptance of special help from his mother all worked together to help enable him to successfully complete his college career.

Other successful college students have described coping mechanisms that have worked well for them. Brenda Conway, a senior at Taylor University, has some of the same personality characteristics as Allen. She is friendly, vivacious, and intelligent and is quite resourceful in searching out ways to compensate for her reading and spelling disability. During her

first week in college she realized that the computer forms for tests were causing special problems for her and after describing her specific kind of disability, the test administrator assured her that the requirements could be altered to allow her to write out her answers rather than fill in the tiny circles.

Brenda also asked professors to allow her to buy texts early so that she could read them during the summer months. Reading is a slow tedious process for Brenda but she prefers reading, however slow, to listening to tapes. She sets up her own reward system. Each evening, she brews a pot of tea. Then she sets a series of small goals for herself, such as reading one page or writing one paragraph. As she completes each segment, she treats herself to several sips of tea and then returns to her work (play recording). Brenda has been on the Dean's List several semesters, which might indicate that her coping strategies are quite successful.

Another successful college student with a severe reading and spelling disability is David Gauntlett who has shared some of his college experiences in talks to educators, both in England and the United States. David, age 40, is working toward an honors degree in psychology at City University in London, England. David's specific learning disability, like Brenda's and Allen's, involves reading and spelling. He found that being told that he had "dyslexia" was especially helpful in enabling him to find ways to cope with his problem. While many teachers and clinicians are looking for ways to

minimize the effects of labeling, which they see as mainly negative, David describes the positive effects of his label, "...for me at least, the knowledge that there was a recognized problem, provided much needed motivation. It provided a certain amount of reassurance, but more importantly, I realized that it was a 'limited disability' and could be circumvented. This allowed me to adopt positive strategies to learning." (Dyslexia Review, Vol. 1, No. 2 [Winter 1978] p. 25) He also found that his understanding of the set of problems associated with dyslexia helped him find ways to discuss his reading and spelling difficulties intelligently with his teachers and administrators. His teachers had tried to discourage his academic pursuits on the basis of his poor written reports. After describing his specific disability to his superiors, he was allowed to dictate reports which a secretary typed with the correct spelling. The result of taking this step is that David is now an honors student.

Sometimes, even the best explanations, to those who are in a position to make judgments and put up barriers, will not produce the desired results. People tend to accept color blindness, tone deafness, and even the inability to write legibly as legitimate and forgivable problems. However, people with severe reading problems must often suffer the stigma of being labeled lazy or even stupid. It is hoped that, as more people like Judy, Brenda, Allen and David share their stories, all people who have reading disabilities will be better understood. Better understanding will enable many

people to shed their guilt feelings and patterns of self deprecation that can be so paralyzing.

Linda _____, who will remain anonymous, felt this kind of paralysis. She wanted to develop gifts that she knew she had. Her goals required a college education. Her discouragement and fears centered around her judgment of herself. She knew she had special talents, but she felt a mental and emotional constriction because she couldn't make sense out of her "split mentality." As she put it, "One part of me is dumb--the other part of me is smart." After a severe depression followed by psychiatric help and specific instruction in reading and spelling, she registered at a good junior college. Continued support through counselling may be needed for her to reach her goal, but she has a drive and determination that should enable her to keep on pushing open the doors that seem to close.

College students with severe reading problems that are not accompanied by observable handicaps, such as partial blindness or cerebral palsy, may often encounter frustration caused by their own faulty perception of their condition combined with the often rigid requirements of college programs or individual professors.

The reading instructor and clinician may need to come to terms with the need for a changing role in working with college students with severe reading problems. As a growing number of intellectually able children with severe reading problems are identified during elementary and secondary school years, more students with a history of learning disabilities will be

applying to colleges and universities. While it is argued that early identification and specialized help should bring about success in reading for these students, I believe there will continue to be those who will need to circumvent some of the traditional reading requirements and find other more efficient ways to learn and perform in college.

The role of the reading instructor and clinician in helping these students find more efficient ways of meeting their goals in college should include: 1) recognizing when a student needs and can benefit from specialized instruction, 2) recommending coping strategies that fit individual needs and 3) determining when vocational or psychological counselling is needed.

Recognizing When a Student Needs Specialized Instruction

The traditional reading improvement programs at the college level have been developmental programs. The college student with a severe reading disability, however, reveals unusual patterns in reading. His listening comprehension, reasoning ability and vocabulary will be of necessity very high while his reading rate will be extremely slow and labored. Errors involving small words as well as multi-syllabic words will be numerous. After careful assessment, it is often apparent that these students need specific instruction that focuses on elements in the very foundation of the reading process. Sometimes because the student will seem very bright and his

comprehension level on tests may be much higher than his word recognition and spelling levels, the reading instructor will mistakenly choose to work at a higher level than is advisable. Filling the holes in the foundation may seem a dull process or an insult to the student but it is essential for insuring continued progress in reading.

Most reading practitioners have some training in the use of programs that have been effective for the student who cannot spell and has difficulty remembering words and sound patterns. Neurological impress, Lauback, Fernald and Orton-Gillingham have each had their proponents. There are also many excellent programs designed to help improve vocabulary and comprehension. Regardless of which program one chooses, however, there are two components that are essential for success. One is that the reading clinician know the approach thoroughly enough to be flexible as he tries to adjust to the unique learning needs of each student. The other is that the reading clinician obtain constant feedback from the student. The student himself can become his own best reading therapist when he is reminded that his reactions and his suggestions are needed.

Recommending Coping Strategies

The student himself should also be the source of ideas for coping mechanisms. While a list of suggestions may serve a useful purpose, the student himself should take an active role in deciding which coping mechanisms are best suited to his own learning style and self image.

After studying the coping mechanisms of over 20 college

students with learning disabilities, I found much variety (See Appendix). Usually the student himself figured out what he needed to do. Sometimes there was a trial and error procedure involved.

Knowing When Vocational or Psychological Counselling Might Be Helpful

Sometimes, even the enterprising student who has been able to adjust well to his reading and spelling problem, experiences a breakdown in his set of coping mechanisms. Sometimes discouragement or anxiety (the kind that can be experienced by any college student) turns into unbearable frustration. The reading clinician who can recognize the beginning signs of such a breakdown should suggest counselling. Hopefully, the counsellor will be aware of the specific needs of the person with severe reading problems. Many otherwise competent psychologists continue to assume that specific reading disability is caused by emotional problems and their advice or procedure is based on a premise that is often false. David Gauntlett, for example, was advised by his counsellor to give up the course he had started, take at least a year off before re-registering and seek help from a psychiatrist. He decided to ignore the advice and his academic progress since that time would suggest that he acted wisely.

However, some students with severe reading problems may need to re-examine goals and take a realistic look at the advantages and disadvantages of their career choices. Examining different

options that would take advantage of his specific skills can help the student make changes in his college program that can be highly beneficial. For example, Allen successfully completed a teacher training program and would have enjoyed teaching chemistry and biology. He was painfully aware, however, that his poor reading and spelling might cause special problems in the classroom, and he decided to study architecture after graduating from college. While he does not feel that his college course work was a waste of time, he might have benefitted greatly from early career counseling. Test anxiety, failure in specific courses, and anxiety about career choices are just a few of the difficulties that may require the help of a counselor.

* * * * *

The population we have focused on is a relatively small group. However, most reading teachers have seen at least a few students who, like Allen, Brenda, David, and Linda, have high academic potential but whose reading and spelling skills are extremely low. The four I have mentioned have been successful because they have developed a good understanding of both their strengths and their weaknesses. They have made a way for themselves. Not everyone will have the ego strength these successful students have displayed. Some will need much more support in order to succeed. While there are no easy answers for the student or the teacher, the best results in developing appropriate college programs and good coping strategies for the student with severe reading disability will occur, I believe,

through listening to the student himself and by encouraging the student to see himself as his own best problem-solver, his own best teacher.

Marilyn Kay
The Reading Group
Urbana, Illinois, 61801

SUGGESTIONS FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH SPECIFIC LEARNING PROBLEMS

1. Admit your problem to yourself and when necessary to others.

2. Never say to yourself, "I'm dumb", just because you can't read or spell adequately.

3. Learn to laugh with others at your mistakes.

4. If a word gives you difficulty, try to get the meaning from the context or use phonetic deciphering.

5. Keep a list of difficult words which you wish to memorize or refer to. A list for each course can be written on the inside cover of your text or notebook.

6. Use a high-lighter on each word you look up in the dictionary. The next time you need the same word (you may find you misspell the same words repeatedly), you can spot the word more quickly.

7. Use a Thesaurus rather than a dictionary if a word is so difficult to spell that you can't easily find it in the dictionary. If you know roughly what the word means, you can look up a word of similar meaning that you can spell and find the word you need in the list of synonyms.

8. Use diagramatic models and colored pens or colored paper to enable you to quickly organize and review materials. For example, one successful student writes sentences and paragraphs on colored squares of paper, using a different color for different aspects of her paper. Next, she lays out a grid on the floor and puts her paper together (much like a puzzle), using the colored squares. After pasting and cutting into strips, she is ready to type her paper.

   Another example of a diagramatic model is one used for note-taking by David Gauntlet. He isolates the central theme and then links concepts to it by a system of tree-like branches. These "thought plans", as he calls them, are useful to him as a form of note-taking and they provide a valuable structure for the retrieval of information. His "tree", with "branches" and "leaves" also serves as a basis for organizing written work and speeches. (Dyslexia Review, Vol. 1, No. 2 [Winter 1978] p. 25).

9. Use a cassette recorder to record lectures. One high school student who had spent most of his school years in classes for the retarded finds that he can now get A's and B's in all of his course work by using a recorder since he can neither read nor spell adequately. He is selective and turns the cassette on and off during class lectures and discussions. The recorder has a counter and he is able to retrieve important information quickly when he needs it.

10. Get tapes of text books from Recording for the Blind. After getting your name registered as a qualified applicant, it usually takes less than 2 weeks to get a recording from Recording for the Blind. Many students like to follow along in the text and highlight main ideas while they listen.

11. Ask the professor for the reading list for his course several months ahead of time. Read the text during the summer or during long vacations when you have plenty of time.

12. When you know there are several different instructors teaching the same course, find out which professor is the best lecturer or gives tests that will not unduly penalize you for your spelling and reading problems. Sometimes, it may be advisable to speak to the professor before you sign up for the course.

13. Be sure to take a balance of subjects in your strong and weak areas. No one can live happily in college with less than 50% success.

14. When you have a problem in a particular class which is a direct result of your specific disability, plan to talk to your professor. Be sure to emphasize your strengths and the things you <u>can</u> do well in his class before you describe the special problem you are having. If the professor thinks you are just being lazy or trying to get out of work, be ready to offer suggestions about extra work you will be ready to do to fulfill course requirements.

15. Ask a parent, a spouse, or a friend to help you read, type, or correct your spelling. If that plan doesn't work, hire a typist who is willing and able to correct your work or to take dictation.

16. Keep working on your reading and spelling problem, but don't spend so much time trying to overcome your problem areas that you don't have time to develop your gifts and talents.

17. If you have a severe reading and spelling problem, try to find out more about the possible cause of your problem. The more you know about your strengths and weaknesses the more readily you can find ways to overcome problems or cope with stress producing situations.

18. Just before a test, whenever you feel tense or anxious, take 3 deep breaths, carefully blowing out the old air after each deep breath. During the test, a deep breath will help you keep your mind clear as you begin to worry about tough questions.